

Human Rights Day Event with Julie  
Su-Roosevelt Room 12/10/96

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PRESERVATION

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REMARKS BY THE PRESIDENT, FIRST LADY HILLARY  
RODHAM CLINTON, AND JULIE SU  
FROM THE HUMAN RIGHTS DAY EVENT

The Roosevelt Room

11:45 A.M. EST

HILLARY RODHAM CLINTON: We are delighted to have you join us at the White House for this special occasion marking International Human Rights Day. Today, as in years past, we have the chance to celebrate advances in human rights on every continent -- and to commit ourselves to making even more progress in the years ahead.

The President and I just visited with the five women who are leading efforts around the world -- six women, who are leading efforts around the world -- to safeguard and strengthen human rights -- especially the rights of women. I have seen firsthand the results of this kind of work in the United States and in many countries I have visited overseas. And I am pleased that the United States, under the President's leadership, is committed to fulfilling the human rights agenda set at the United Nations Fourth World Conference on Women in Beijing last year.

The work that these six women are doing to improve the status of women and girls is critical to strengthening human rights throughout all societies. In country after country we have seen that when women are given the rights they are due -- the rights of education, health care, jobs and credit, legal protection and the chance to participate fully in the political life of their countries -- they benefit, their families benefit, and their societies benefit. And the world is better for their contributions.

It is my pleasure to introduce one of these women to you. Julie Su, a young American attorney whose commitment to human rights led her to work on behalf of immigrant workers in this country. Julie helped expose the illegal exploitation of Thai immigrants -- most of them women -- in a sweatshop in California. Today, she continues to work with immigrants, helping them find

jobs, secure proper medical care, and be accorded the dignity and respect that every person deserves.

Her work -- and the work that each of you in this room does every day to strengthen human rights around the world -- reflects the highest ideals of our nation and of our commitment to democracy. We thank all of you for your concern, compassion, and service on behalf of our human family. And for your continuing commitment to advance human rights against all challenges and obstacles in the years ahead. So please join me in welcoming Julie Su.

JULIE SU: Thank you, I would like to thank the President and the First Lady for inviting us to meet with them today on International Human Rights Day. It is an honor to be here in White House with my sisters who have struggled for human rights, especially women's rights, in this country and around the world.

I speak for all of us when I say I believe that everyone has a role and a responsibility to improve human rights. I know this firsthand because of the work I have done with some people very dear to my heart. About eighty Thai garment workers, almost all of them women. From their homes in impoverished rural Thailand, they dared to imagine a better life for themselves, and came to this country in pursuit of the American dream.

What they found instead was the garment industry where many manufacturers and retailers reap exorbitant profits off the backs and broken dreams of garment workers. These manufacturers and retailers often choose to close their eyes, hoping to absolve themselves of responsibility with degradation, poverty and suffering the garment workers endure everyday.

In August 1995, news of the Thai workers held behind barbed wire and armed guards for years in Almonty, California, forced to work 18 hour days for less than sixty cents an hour, shocked the world. It reminded us that flagrant abuses of human rights occur not just in countries thousands of miles away but right here in America. I, like many of you, was horrified. As a woman, a lawyer, and the daughter of Chinese immigrants, I feel a deep personal responsibility to respond to the injustices these women had endured and to the uncertainty they faced.

Through the education I have been fortunate to receive in our countries most elite institutions, I have been given access to the levels of power that many in our society do not have. That power can either be used to exclude, divide and to preserve privilege or employed as a tool to strengthen and build communities and to combat inequality.

With power comes responsibility, for individuals, for corporations, and for governments. I have done my best to use my power to be a voice for immigrant workers and to give them access

so their own voices can be heard. Tomorrow in Boston, I along with human rights activists from Nigeria, Guatemala, and Burma, will receive 1996 Reebok Human Rights Award. All of us who fight for human rights everywhere strive to use our power to make human rights part of the national and international discourse.

The United States, led by the Clinton Administration, understands the power of this great nation and has taken this responsibility seriously. President Clinton's commitment to shining a spotlight on the shameful existence of American sweatshops, most of who employ women, is unprecedented. And the First Lady has been an outspoken advocate for the rights of women and girls. She has traveled throughout the U.S. and around the world, tirelessly articulating the message that women's rights are human rights and human rights are women's rights.

The Thai workers have slowly and courageously rebuilt their lives in the aftermath of their brutal enslavement. It has been a privilege to work with them. Everyday, they remind me of the urgency of human rights work, of its affect on the real lives of real people. To me, these women, embody the most American of ideals. The triumph of struggle against injustice in all its forms. These remarkable Thai women, along with hundreds of Latino garment workers in Los Angeles have joined to hold accountable the manufacturers and retailers who profited from their labor. They continue to challenge American to live up to its promise of justice, dignity, and freedom.

I believe it is our duty as Americans to make good on this promise. As a human rights activist and as an American it has been an honor to help them realize the hopes and dreams that brought them and so many like them to this country.

President Clinton has often spoke of a place called Hope. I have seen that place too, in the eyes of the Thai and Latino workers who would have us all remember that the people who sew our clothes are human beings, mostly women, sometimes children. All of them, people with dreams. Mr. President and Mrs. Clinton, I thank you for not only continually giving us reason to hope but for your willingness to act to ensure that the horror the Thai workers endured will never, ever, be repeated. It is a distinct honor to be here this morning with my fellow activists and to present to you the President of the United States.

THE PRESIDENT: This may be one of those cases where the introduction was better than the speech. (Laughter.) Thank you, Julie and thank all of you for being here. I'm honored to be with this distinguished group on Human Rights Day. I want to thank all of you in attendance. I think Congresswoman Connie Morella is here. Where are you, Connie? There you are, right in front of me. (Laughter.) Our AID Administrator, Brian Atwood; Assistant Secretary John Shattuck, Assistant Secretary Phyllis Oakley and all of you who represent organizations who have done

so much to advance the cause of freedom around the world. I want to say a special word of welcome to my good friend, Gerry Ferraro. Thank you for being here.

Before I begin what I want to say about human rights, I think it is appropriate on Human Rights Day that I have just gotten a report from the Secretary of State Warren Christopher, who is meeting with our NATO foreign ministers in Brussels, that, together, they agreed to hold an historic NATO summit in July in Madrid to carry forward our goal of building a Europe that is undivided, democratic and at peace for the first time in history -- one in which we will work to forge a partnership with Russia, adapt NATO to the demands of a new era, and invite the first aspiring members from among Europe's new democracies into NATO. My goal is to see them become full members of the Alliance for NATO's 50th birthday in 1999.

It's fitting that this step comes on Human Rights Day and on Bill of Rights Day and in Human Rights Week. The prospect of NATO membership and integration into the West has been a very strong incentive for Europe's new democracies to expand their political freedoms and to promote universal human rights.

Working together with our allies and our partners, we're building a world where, as Judge Learned Hand once said, rights know no boundaries and justice no frontiers.

For the first time in history, more than half the world's people now live under governments of their own choosing. Today we dedicate ourselves to the unfinished task of extending freedom's reach. Promoting democracy and human rights reflects our ideals and reinforces our interests. It's a fundamental pillar of our foreign policy.

History shows that nations where rights are respected and governments are freely chosen are more likely to be partners in peace and prosperity. That is why we've worked hard over the last four years to help equality and freedom take root in South Africa, to stop the reign of terror in Haiti, to promote reform in Bosnia and Russia, to bring freedom back to Bosnia, and peace, and to enable millions of suffering people all around the world to reclaim their simple human dignity. That is why we must continue to support the world's newest democracies and to keep the pressure on its remaining repressive regimes.

The First Lady and I have just had a remarkable meeting with these six women. They are courageous in promoting human rights in different ways. They are courageous in promoting democracy and empowerment by helping women to live up to their potential. You can just look at them and see that they've put the lie to the notion that human rights is some Western cultural idea that has no place in other societies.

Julie Su, who spoke so eloquently, has played a crucial role in stopping the exploitation of Thai women immigrants in sweat shops. And I am proud of the work that Secretary Reich and the Labor Department has done in that regard, and we intend to continue to do that for the next four years.

For the last 20 years, Dawn Calabria has fought to protect women refugees and children.

Nahid Toubia is a doctor from Sudan whose organization has played a pioneering role in women's health issues.

Barbara Frey has promoted corporate responsibility for human rights around the world and has also promoted education of children in her native Minnesota in human rights.

Wanjiru Muigai from Kenya has helped women in her country to secure their legal rights and she made a passionate appeal to me to focus on targeted United States aid in a way that will promote the empowerment of women in nation after nation.

And since coming here from El Salvador, Lillian Perdomo has worked to protect women from domestic violence right here in the District of Columbia.

Each of these women tells a story for many others. Together their experiences underscore a shared truth. As the First Lady said in Beijing and as Julie repeated, human rights are women's rights and women's rights are human rights.

I want to tell you that I am very proud of the role that Hillary, Ambassador Albright, and all the members of the United States delegation -- and thank you, Margorie Margolies Mezvinsky, back there -- who played in issuing Beijing's call to action. That was a great moment for the United States and a great moment for women around the world.

Beijing's message was as clear as it was compelling. We cannot advance our ideals and interests unless we focus more attention on the fundamental human rights and basic needs of women and girls. We must recognize that it is a violation of human rights when girls and women are sold into prostitution, when rape becomes a weapon of war, when women are denied the right to plan their own families, including through forced abortions, when young girls are brutalized by genital mutilation, when women around the world are unsafe even in their own homes.

If women are free from violence, if they're healthy and educated, if they can live and work as full and equal partners in any society, then families will flourish. And when they do, communities and nations will thrive.

We are putting our efforts to protect and advance women's rights where they belong -- in the mainstream of American foreign policy. During the last four years, we have worked to steer more of our assistance to women and girls, to help protect their legal rights and to give them a greater voice in their political and economic futures. These programs are making a real difference -- whether by raising female voter turnout in Bangladesh, promoting equality for women in Nepal, enabling women in Bosnia to participate fully in the rebuilding of their country. But we must do more.

Today, I call upon the Senate, again, to ratify the United Nations Convention on the elimination of all forms of discrimination against women. (Applause.) As you know, many, many, many other nations have done this. In our country where we have worked so hard against domestic violence, where we have worked so hard to empower women, it is, to say the least, an embarrassment that the United States has not done this, and there is no excuse for this situation to continue.

I'm also pleased to announce several initiatives totalling \$4 million to protect and advance women's rights, including new efforts to help Rwandan women who have been torn from their homes and to provide women refugees around the world with access to reproductive health services. They've built on the commitment I made at last year's G-7 summit to help women in Bosnia start new businesses and will help women across Africa to do the same. They strengthen our commitment to stop the trafficking of women and children for prostitution and child labor. And they will help women's groups in Asia fight violence and discrimination.

In short, these efforts will reinforce America's global leadership on behalf of human rights and democracy in perhaps the most fundamental areas at which they are at risk. They reflect our nation's enduring commitment to the freedoms of our Bill of Rights that safeguard our own citizens. They support the values in the Universal Declaration of Human Rights that promote freedom, justice, and peace all around the world.

We live at a time when our most deeply-held ideals are ascendant, but this hopeful trend toward freedom and democracy is neither inevitable, nor irreversible, nor has it extended to the real lives of hundreds of millions of people all across the globe. While we seek to engage all nations on terms of goodwill, we must continue to stand up for the proposition that all people, without regard to their gender, their nationality, their race, their ethnic group or their religion, should have a chance to live up to their potential.

I want to say again how gratified I am that there are people like these six women alive and well and at work in the world -- people like so many of you. It is a constant source of inspiration to me. I want to say again how grateful I am to the First Lady for going across the world to raise our concerns about this and bringing back to me the knowledge of the work that has been done and what still can be done on behalf of women and girls.

As I sign this proclamation marking International Human Rights Day, I ask you all to remember not just that women's rights or human rights, but that the defense and the promotion of human rights are the responsibilities of all of us. Thank you. (Applause.)

(The proclamation is signed.) (Applause.)

THE PRESIDENT: Thank you all very much. (Applause.)

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11:50 A.M. EST