

American Physical Society 2024 March Meeting: Human Rights

Many thanks to Smitha and Paul for organizing this session and for inviting me to say a few words at its close.

I will start my very brief presentation with a quote from Einstein:

“The existence and validity of human rights are not written in the stars. The ideals concerning the conduct of men toward each other and the desirable structure of the community have been conceived and taught by enlightened individuals in the course of history. Those ideals and convictions which resulted from historical experience, from the craving for beauty and harmony, have been readily accepted in theory by man – and at all times, have been trampled upon by the same people under the pressure of their animal instincts. A large part of history is therefore replete with the struggle for those human rights, an eternal struggle in which a final victory can never be won. But to tire in that struggle would mean the ruin of society.”

The times we live in are certainly no exception to Einstein's statement about "at all times [human rights] have been trampled upon". The sufferings of so many around the world is horrifying and heart breaking.

At the same time there also goes on the struggle for human rights by courageous people like Narges Mohammadi who is carrying out the struggle, as she writes, "from behind high cold walls of a prison".

Encieh Erfani, another speaker this evening, is also such a courageous fighter in the cause of human rights. She is fortunately not in jail but is in exile without a position.

Another courageous fighter for human rights whom I greatly admire was the famous physicist Andrei Sakharov, who, like Muhammadi, also received the Nobel Peace Prize, in 1975, and who was then sent into exile by the Soviet authorities. Sakharov's memory is honored by the American Physical Society with the Sakharov Prize whose current recipient Eugene Chudnowsky you heard speaking in this session.

I would like to quote from a letter Sakharov wrote to President Jimmy Carter in 1977: "It's very important to defend those who suffer because of their nonviolent struggle for an open society, for justice, for other people, whose rights are violated. It is our duty and yours to fight for them. I think that a lot depends on this struggle - trust between peoples, confidence in lofty promises, and, in the final analysis, international security."

The important point in both my quotes is a message to those of us who are fortunate not to be in prison or in exile, is that we are all required to take part in the struggle for human rights here and abroad. Even when it seems, and it often does, that there is very little we can do about the terrible things going on in the world, we can and should show our concern for the victims of human rights violations. One way of doing this, which I hope you will do, is by supporting activities of organizations dedicated to helping our colleagues in distress. Surprisingly, the letters written by these organizations often have positive effects on how the prisoners are treated and they are essential for keeping up the spirit of those imprisoned or otherwise mistreated for their advocacy of human rights with which I am familiar:

- The Committee of Concerned Scientists
- Scholars at Risk
- The Committee for the International Freedom of Scientists of the APS

Of course, this is not to the exclusion of organizations like the International Rescue Committee and Doctors Without Borders, who are not focused on scientists or scholars. Thank you for your attention.