

# Some Probes into the Terrain of Human Rights

## SENTRIES

Photographs by Richard Avedon

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*Task: to be where I am.*

*Even when I'm in this solemn and absurd*

*role: I am still the place*

*where creation does some work on itself.*

—from Tomas Tranströmer's "Sentry Duty,"

translated from the Swedish by Robert Bly

Tyrannies all over the world exist in the ironclad certainty that people are nothing more than meat on bones. Anything that their subjects are or have beyond that exists at the sheerest whim of the regime. Indeed, the notion that human beings have absolute rights simply by virtue of their humanity—the right, for instance, not to be tortured—arises initially as a wild, untethered assertion in the face of eons of stark evidence to the contrary. But it is a magical assertion.

“We hold these truths to be self-evident, that all men are created equal, that they are endowed by their Creator with certain unalienable Rights, that among these are Life, Liberty and



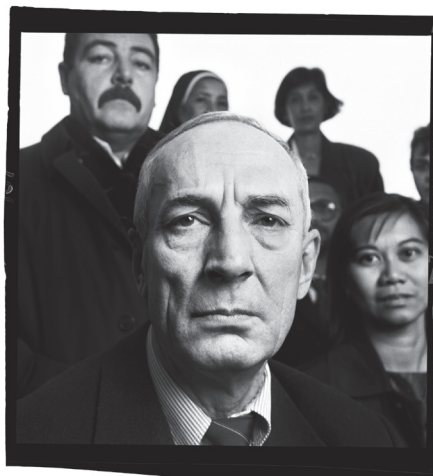
*Bahey El-Din Hassan, Egypt*



*Florence Butegewa, Zimbabwe*



*Cecilia Jimenez, Philippines*



*Yuri Schmidt, Russia*

the pursuit of Happiness.” The truly revolutionary insight in that declaration is contained not so much in the words “truths,” “self-evident,” or “created equal” as in the calm self-certainty of those opening words: “We hold.” The text does not launch out with “It is manifestly self-evident that” or with some similar construction, as strict logic might seem to dictate. In fact, the self-evidence of the assertion remains hidden, fugitive, immanent at best, until people rise up to embrace it, to hold fast to its insistence (mutually pledging their lives, their fortunes, and their sacred honor in the process). It is holding such truths to be self-evident that first makes them so—and, more specifically, doing so in concert, alongside others.

Forty-five years ago last month, the members of the General Assembly of the United Nations adopted and proclaimed a Universal Declaration of Human Rights. Most of that organization’s member states, however, instantly took to dismissing the document’s ringing assertions as so many dead words, and it was left to individual citizens in those states, often through public stands of almost preposterous courage, to realize the declaration’s most basic premises. Theirs is a labor that remains far short of completion, of course. But fundamental to that work—the foundation on which everything else has risen—has been the simple, endlessly repeated act of bearing witness, of compiling accurate and reliable information on the fate of the victims of the human rights depredations of renegade regimes. Such monitoring has usually had to take place in the very midst of those depredations, and it is almost always very dangerous work.

Each December, the New York-based organization Human Rights Watch commemorates the anniversary of the Declaration of Human Rights by gathering together a dozen or so human rights monitors from countries throughout the world—the very people whose vigilance makes the rest of the human rights movement possible. (Often, their trips to New York constitute the first time these people have ever been out of their homelands. And not infrequently they are prevented from coming at all—as in the case,



*Father Matías Camuñas Marchante, Venezuela*



*Sister Nohemy Palencia, Colombia*



*Srey Chanphallara, Cambodia*



*Mary Rock, Israeli-occupied West Bank*



*Pieter Loggenberg, South Africa*



*Monique Mujawamariya, Rwanda*

this year, of China's Liu Gang and Syria's Salama George Kila, both of whom are in prison.) The sentries come from all walks of life: lawyers, social workers, peasant organizers, priests. This year's crew even included an actual sentry—Pieter Loggenberg, a prison guard at Pollsmoor, South Africa, who helped to found an organization that monitors living conditions in the depths of the apartheid regime's security institutions. A fellow-monitor of Loggenberg's, the Cairo journalist Bahey El-din Hassan, operates within perhaps even narrower (and ever narrowing) confines. The Egyptian Organization for Human Rights, which he heads, regularly manages to alienate both the Mubarak regime and the Islamic-fundamentalist movement, upon which that regime has been lavishing its increasingly extraconstitutional attentions. The regime shows little patience with Bahey's insistence on the rule of law, and the fundamentalists have nothing but contempt for such "cosmopolitan" ravings, either. Nevertheless, Bahey persists.

All the monitors have their stories. Rwanda's Monique Mujawamariya's is typical of those of this year's crew. Trained as a social worker, she helped found and now directs an organization

that has been painstakingly documenting a pattern of government-sponsored atrocity and slaughter across her small East-Central African homeland. When members of Human Rights Watch visited the country, she led them directly to a recent massacre site. Later, when the delegation was at the airport, preparing to leave, one of its members saw her being pulled aside by the regime's chief torturer. Subsequently reaching her by telephone, the Human Rights Watch people asked what he had wanted. "Oh, he just said that if he sees his name in your report he's going to have me killed," she told them. This was no idle threat: Her face already bears the scars of a car "accident." Understandably alarmed, they asked her what they ought to do. "Why, print it, of course," Mujawamariya replied, without a moment's hesitation. And they did.

Such bravado ought not to work. How can it? How can mere vigilance, the puny insistence on the rule of law in the face of armored, historically entrenched tyranny, ever make any difference? We hold these truths—these truths and nothing else: Aside from them we are naked before power. Nothing is there except the bold, scary insistence that something is there: this ineffable but essential thing called human rights. And yet, when enough people start insisting forcefully enough on those rights, then, over time, a light does begin to shine in the middle of the dark, a substantial light that not only illumines but actually begins to *melt tyrannies*. It's uncanny.

But one should be clear about the nature of that light: The Bible notwithstanding, the Truth by itself never made anyone free. It has always been *people*, sentries like these, witnessing and declaring the truth, who work that magic.