

Remarks by the President at Clinton Global Initiative

New York, New York

2:12 P.M. EDT

THE PRESIDENT: Good afternoon, all of you. I was just discussing with President Clinton that if Chelsea begins delivery while I'm speaking, she has my motorcade and will be able to navigate traffic. (Laughter.) Because actually, it's pretty smooth for me during the week. I don't know what the problem is. Everybody hypes the traffic, but I haven't noticed. (Laughter.)

Always wonderful to follow Matt Damon. (Laughter.) I saw people trickling out after he was done. (Laughter and applause.) These are the hardcore policy people who decided to stay for me. (Laughter.)

I want to thank President Clinton for your friendship and your leadership, and bringing us together as only he can. Bill first asked me come to CGI when I was a senator -- and as President, I've been proud to come back every year. As President, Bill asked Americans to serve their country -- and we recently celebrated the 20th anniversary of AmeriCorps on the South Lawn. And Bill asked all of you to make commitments to better our world -- and together you've touched the lives of hundreds of millions of people. And it's a testimony, I think, to any leader, not just for what they themselves do, but the degree to which they're able to inspire action from others. And by that measure, obviously Bill Clinton has continued to exert extraordinary global leadership for decades and I suspect for decades more to come. (Applause.)

Now, in agreeing to come I had an ask, as well. I think one of the best decisions I ever made as President was to ask Hillary Clinton to serve as our nation's Secretary of State. (Applause.) She just welcomed me backstage. I'll always be grateful for her extraordinary leadership representing our nation around the world. And I still have a lot of debt to pay, though, because the two of them were separated far too often. Hillary put in a lot of miles during her tenure as Secretary of State. She has the post-administration glow right now. (Laughter.) She looks much more rested. (Laughter.)

So it's wonderful to be back at CGI. I cannot imagine a more fitting audience with whom to discuss the work that brings me here today -- and that is our obligation as free peoples, as free nations, to stand with the courageous citizens and brave civil society groups who are working for equality and opportunity and justice and human dignity all over the world.

I'm especially pleased that we're joined today by our many partners in this work -- governments, civil society groups, including faith leaders, and men and women from around the world who devote their lives and, at times, risk their lives to lifting up their communities, and strengthening their nations, and claiming universal rights on behalf of their fellow citizens. And we're honored by the presence of these individuals.

As we do every time this year, Presidents and Prime Ministers converge on this great city to advance important work. But as leaders, we are not the most important people here today. It is the civil society leaders who, in many ways, are going to have the more lasting impact, because as the saying goes, the most important title is not president or prime minister; the most important title is citizen.

It is citizens -- ordinary men and women, determined to forge their own future -- who throughout history have sparked all the great change and progress. It was citizens here in America who worked to abolish slavery, who marched for women's rights and workers' rights and civil rights. They are the reason I can stand here today as President of the United States. It's citizens who, right now, are standing up for the freedom that is their God-given right.

And I've seen it myself, in the advocates and activists that I've met all over the world. I've seen it in the courage of Berta Soler, the leader of Cuba's Ladies in White who endure harassment and arrest in order to win freedom for their loved ones and for the Cuban people. I've seen it in the determination of Russians in Moscow and St. Petersburg

who speak up for rule of law and human rights. I've seen it the passion of advocates in Senegal who nurture their democracy, and young Africans across the continent who are helping to marshal in Africa's rise. I've seen it the hope of young Palestinians in Ramallah, who dream of building their future in a free and independent state. I see it in the perseverance of men and women in Burma who are striving to build a democracy against the odds.

These citizens remind us why civil society is so essential. When people are free to speak their minds and hold their leaders accountable, governments are more responsive and more effective. When entrepreneurs are free to create and develop new ideas, then economies are more innovative, and attract more trade and investment, and ultimately become more prosperous.

When communities, including minorities, are free to live and pray and love as they choose; when nations uphold the rights of all their people — including, perhaps especially, women and girls — then those countries are more likely to thrive. If you want strong, successful countries, you need strong, vibrant civil societies. When citizens are free to organize and work together across borders to make our communities healthier, our environment cleaner, and our world safer, that's when real change comes.

And we see this spirit in the new commitments you're making here at CGI to help the people of West Africa in their fight against Ebola.

We've also seen this spirit in another cause — the global campaign against anti-personnel landmines. Tireless advocates like Jody Williams fought for the Ottawa Convention; leaders like Patrick Leahy have led the charge in Washington. Twenty years ago, President Clinton stood at the United Nations and pledged that the United States would work toward the elimination of these landmines, and earlier today, we announced that we will take another important step. Outside of the unique circumstances of the Korean Peninsula — where we have a longstanding commitment to the defense of our ally South Korea — the United States will not use anti-personnel landmines. (Applause.)

So we will begin destroying our stockpiles not required for the defense of South Korea. And we're going to continue to work to find ways that would allow us to ultimately comply fully and accede to the Ottawa Convention. And the United States will continue to lead as the world's largest donor of global demining efforts, freeing communities and countries from these weapons.

The point is this started in civil society. That's what prompted action by President Clinton and by myself. And promoting civil society that can surface issues and push leadership is not just in keeping with our values, it's not charity. It's in our national interests. Countries that respect human rights — including freedom of association -- happen to be our closest partners. That is not an accident. Conversely, when these rights are suppressed, it fuels grievances and a sense of injustice that over time can fuel instability or extremism. So I believe America's support for civil society is a matter of national security.

It is precisely because citizens and civil society can be so powerful — their ability to harness technology and connect and mobilize at this moment so unprecedented — that more and more governments are doing everything in their power to silence them.

From Russia to China to Venezuela, you are seeing relentless crackdowns, vilifying legitimate dissent as subversive. In places like Azerbaijan, laws make it incredibly difficult for NGOs even to operate. **From Hungary to Egypt, endless regulations and overt intimidation increasingly target civil society.** And around the world, brave men and women who dare raise their voices are harassed and attacked and even killed.

So today, we honor those who have given their lives. Among them, in Cameroon, Eric Lembembe; in Libya, Salwa Bugaighis; in Cambodia, Chut Wutty; in Russia, Natalia Estemirova. We stand in solidarity with those who are detained at this very moment. In Venezuela, Leopoldo Lopez; in Burundi, Pierre-Claver Mbonimpa; in Egypt, Ahmed Maher; in China, Liu Xiaobo; and now Ilham Tohti; in Vietnam, Father Ly. And so many others. They deserve to be free. They ought to be released.

This growing crackdown on civil society is a campaign to undermine the very idea of democracy. And what's needed is an even stronger campaign to defend democracy.

Since I took office, the United States has continued to lead the way, and as Secretary of State, Hillary Clinton helped champion our efforts. Across the globe, no country does more to strengthen civil society than America. And one year ago, here in New York, I pledged that the United States would do even more, and I challenged the world to join us in this cause. Working with many of you, that's what we've done. And today I'm proud to announce a series of new steps.

First, partnering and protecting civil society groups around the world is now a mission across the U.S. government. So under a new presidential memorandum that I'm issuing today, federal departments and agencies will consult and partner more regularly with civil society groups. They will oppose attempts by foreign governments to dictate the nature of our assistance to civil society. (Applause.) And they will oppose efforts by foreign governments to restrict freedoms of peaceful assembly and association and expression. So this is not just a matter of the State Department, or USAID. It's across the government — this is part of American leadership.

Second, we're creating new innovation centers to empower civil society groups around the world. And I want to thank our partners in this effort, including the government of Sweden and the Aga Khan Development Network. Starting next year, civil society groups will be able to use these centers to network and access knowledge and technology and funding that they need to put their ideas into action. And we'll start with six centers in Latin America, in Sub-Saharan Africa, in the Middle East and in Asia. Oppressive governments are sharing "worst practices" to weaken civil society. We're going to help you share the "best practices" to stay strong and vibrant.

Number three, we're expanding our support and funding for the Community of Democracies to better coordinate the diplomacy and pressure that we bring to bear. And this means more support for those who are fighting against the laws that restrict civil society. In recent years, we've worked together to prevent new limits on civil society from Kenya to Cambodia. And we've helped expand the space for civil society in countries from Honduras to Tunisia to Burma. And standing together, we can do even more.

And finally, we're increasing our support to society groups across the board. We're going to increase our emergency assistance to embattled NGOs. We'll do more to match groups with the donors and funding that they need. And in the coming months, our Treasury Department will finalize regulations so it's even easier and less costly for your foundations to make grants overseas. (Applause.)

We'll increase our legal assistance and technical support to those pushing back against onerous laws and regulations. And through our Open Government Partnership, we'll help more governments truly partner with civil society. We'll continue to stand up for a free and open Internet, so individuals can access information and make up their own minds about the issues that their countries confront.

And through our programs to engage young leaders around the world, we're helping to build the next generation of civil society leaders. And our message to those young people is simple: America stands with you.

We stand with educators like Walid Ali of Kenya. Where's Walid? I just had a chance to meet him. There he is. (Applause.) In his village near the border of Somalia, young people without jobs are tempted by drugs. They're recruited by terrorists. So Walid offers them counseling, and business classes, and small plots of farmland — helping them rebuild their own lives and their communities and giving them options for the future. He strives, he says, not just for the idea of democracy, but to "cement the practice of democracy." So we thank you, Walid, for your extraordinary efforts, and we stand with you. (Applause.)

We stand with humanitarians like Miriam Canales. Where is Miriam? There she is right there. (Applause.) In communities that are wracked at times by horrific violence, children are so terrified to walk the streets that many begin that dangerous and often deadly march north. And Miriam's outreach centers give them a safe place to play and grow and learn. And she says her dream is "that people in Honduras can walk free" and that young people will have "opportunities in their own country." We couldn't be prouder of you, Miriam, and we stand with you. (Applause.)

We stand with activists like Sopheap Chak, of Cambodia. Where's -- there she is, Sopheap. (Applause.) Sopheap saw a fellow human rights advocate hauled off by the police, and she could have fled, too, but she says she's never thought of leaving Cambodia even for minute. So she keeps organizing and marching and mobilizing youth to demand justice. And she says: "I dream that Cambodian citizens can enjoy the freedoms that they are entitled to." We could not be prouder of you, and we stand with you. (Applause.)

And we stand with advocates like John Gad of Egypt. Where's John? (Applause.) Like all Egyptians, John has lived through the turmoil of recent years. As an artist, he uses his poetry and performances to help people "discover the power inside them," which is as good a description of being an organizer as anything -- and being a leader. And he's been working to help women and girls recover from violence and sexual assault. He's focused, he says, on "how to teach Egyptians to accept each other." And he has said that "we have rights that we can achieve in a peaceful way." John is the future. That's why we stand with him. (Applause.)

Now, these individuals are just a small sample, they're just an example of the extraordinary drive and courage and commitment of people that oftentimes are outside of the headlines. People don't do stories on them. When they're endangered or harassed, it usually doesn't surface in the news. But they are those who are pushing the boulder up the hill to make sure that the world is a little bit of a better place.

And we live in a complicated world. We've got imperfect choices. The reality is sometimes, for instance, for the sake of our national security, the United States works with governments that do not fully respect the universal rights of their citizens. These are choices that I, as President, constantly have to make. And I will never apologize for doing everything in my power to protect the safety and security of the American people. That is my first and primary job. (Applause.) But that does not mean that human rights can be simply sacrificed for the sake of expediency.

So although it is uncomfortable, although it sometimes causes friction, the United States will not stop speaking out for the human rights of all people, and pushing governments to uphold those rights and freedoms. We will not stop doing that, because that's part of who we are, and that's part of what we stand for. (Applause.)

And when governments engage in tactics against citizens and civil society, hoping nobody will notice, it is our job to shine a spotlight on that abuse. And when individuals like the one I introduced are being held down, it's our job to help lift them back up. When they try to wall you off from the world, we want to connect you with each other. When your governments may try to pass oppressive laws, we'll try to oppose them. When they try to cut off your funding, we're going to try to give you a lifeline. And when they try to silence you, we want to amplify your voice.

And if, amid all the restrictions, and all the pressure, and all the harassment, and all the fear, if they try to tell you that the world does not care and that your friends have forsaken you, do not ever believe it. Because you are not alone. You are never alone. (Applause.) Your fellow advocates stand with you, and your communities stand with you. Your friends around the world stand with you. The United States of America stands with you, and its President stands with you.

No matter how dark the hour, we remember those words of Dr. King: "The time is always ripe to do right." And Dr. King also said: "The arc of the moral universe is long, but it bends towards justice." The reason we support civil society is because we have seen in this country of ours that it does, in fact, bend toward justice. But it does not do so on its own. It does so because there are hands of ordinary people doing extraordinary things every single day and they pull that arc in the direction of justice.

That's why we have freedom in this country. That's why I'm able to stand before you here today. And that's why we will stand with them tomorrow.

God bless you all. God bless all those who are working under tough conditions in every corner of the world. (Applause.) Thank you, CGI. Thank you, President Clinton. Thank you. (Applause.)