

**Speech by
First Lady Eliza Reid
for Amnesty International
on Human Rights Day
10 December 2023**

Good afternoon. It's an honour to be with you on this important anniversary. It was three-quarters of a century ago today, soon after the end of a massive global conflict, that the UN General Assembly gathered to adopt a declaration on universal human rights. Not a treaty or a legal document, but a declaration, a statement of inalienable human rights that has inspired numerous legal binding treaties and agreements in the intervening decades. And a declaration that has become the most translated document in the world, available in more than five hundred languages.

The declaration is not perfect, but it does lay out common goals for nations and states, a guiding light, one hopes, for states to bear in mind when creating the policies for a just society. Three-quarters of a century later, we are, of course, living in a world where human rights are violated on a daily basis, on a scale both large and small.

The UNDHR was created to be a non-partisan document, but it is often hard to extricate its contents from politics, whether those of a group or of a nation. Yet it should not be. Does any rational person really disagree with the statements that “all human beings are born free and equal in dignity and in rights?” That “everyone has the right to life, liberty and security of person?” Or with so many of the declaration's 28 other articles?

We live with incredible privilege here in Iceland. The privilege that most of us live in relative safety and security, in what is called the world's safest country, with one of the world's highest standards of living. We live in a healthy democracy, where we have good access to our elected officials, where we have a right to protest peacefully, to engage in activism, to rally for change ... and where our voices can sometimes be heard more, even if it doesn't always feel like it. I am personally grateful for this.

I am also grateful for the work of our elected officials and public servants, who I generally believe are serving we citizens and residents with integrity and hard work, while with many complex circumstances to consider. I trust that they also use this declaration as one of their guiding lights.

And what of our place in the world? What of our obligations, not to tell other nations what to do, but to speak up for injustice when others are unable?

Today's event is organized by Amnesty International, and, as usual, they are doing incredibly important and vital work in raising awareness about global human rights violations. Their websites – both Icelandic and international, highlights the work of specific individuals whose human rights are now being violated, whose stories illustrate larger problems.

What larger problems? Well, where do I start? I am thinking of the thousands of civilians, of children, who have been killed in Gaza and of those who have lost loved ones and been displaced. I am thinking of those affected by the attacks on people in Israel on October 7. Of Afghan women who have systematically had their rights to education, to expression, to freedom, eradicated. Of queer activists in Russia and many other countries whose vital work has been declared illegal. There are simply too many ongoing crises to recount them all now.

But let us not allow “too many to mention” immobilize us into inaction. We cannot do all things for all people. But we can use our voices, use our influence, to continue to speak up for what we believe is right, live according to our consciences.

At the same time that we demand improvements, changes, the return of liberties, ceasefires, peace, let us also remember basic human kindnesses and dignities to each other. Let us recognize and be thankful for this declaration on human rights, and the strides we have made towards further legal parameters to protect human rights.

We must be rightly horrified at the travesties that are taking place even as I speak. But we can also celebrate the fact that other horrific outrages have undoubtedly been prevented thanks to this declaration and other more legally-binding frameworks and agreements that have built on it.

I want to end by thanking those of you working often behind the scenes to implement change, thanking the Amnesty team and supporters for everything you are doing and the causes and people you are keeping in our hearts and in our minds. And I want to encourage all of you to remain passionate about the need to continue championing for just societies, not only here in Iceland, but around the world.

Thank you.