



PALESTINE HUMAN RIGHTS BULLETIN

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NOAM CHOMSKY ON

INTERNATIONAL LEAGUE FOR HUMAN RIGHTS:

AND ISRAELI HUMAN RIGHTS VIOLATIONS

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What follows is a lengthy excerpt from a letter written by Dr. Noam Chomsky. It was sent to Roger Baldwin, Honorary President of the International League for Human Rights (ILHR).

In this very significant statement Dr. Chomsky points out the failure of the ILHR to squarely face the fact that Israel is a violator of the human rights of Palestinians.

This failing is not peculiar to the ILHR, but unfortunately plagues many civil libertarian organizations in the U. S.

In this period of our history, in which many Americans are becoming aware of international human rights issues -- a major goal of our campaign has been to call to their attention the fact that "Palestinians, too, have human rights" -- we thank Dr. Noam Chomsky for his contributions to this effort.

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AN OPEN LETTER TO ROGER BALDWIN

Roger N. Baldwin, Honorary President
The International League for Human Rights

I have received a copy of the Annual Review for 1976-7, with the accompanying letter referring to the "desperate situations" to which the League responds around the world, and asking support from those who "believe in what we are doing." There is no doubt that the League continues to do important work. Nevertheless, the Annual Review reveals the persistence of tendencies that undermine the moral basis for its work, in my opinion. I hope that you will not mind if I write frankly about them to you directly...

...

In evaluating the Annual Review of a New York-based League for Human Rights, we will naturally want to compare the treatment of the United States and countries to which it gives massive support with the treatment of enemies of the US government. In the latter category, the obvious cases are Russia and Vietnam. In the former category, the obvious case, apart from the United States itself, is Israel, by a large measure the major recipient of American aid and a country which enjoys a uniquely favorable press in the United States. I think that the comparison of these four cases leads to some conclusions that should disturb anyone committed to the defense of human rights...

...

(Here, Prof. Chomsky deals with the League's failure to deal with human rights violations within the U. S. and its distortion of the human rights situation in present day Vietnam.)

[He continues, noting that in the case of Vietnam...]

The Review calls for an on-the-spot investigation by a neutral international agency, and rejects "as unfounded in fact" a response of the Vietnamese government of these matters. Noting this, let us turn to a rather striking contrast: namely, the case of Israel, a crucial test of the honor of an American-based human rights organization, for reasons already noted. Here, the Review calls for no on-the-spot investigations, and when citing government authorities, raises no questions as to whether their responses

are "founded in fact." Yet the authors of the Review certainly are aware that these responses are blatantly false. Eye-witness testimony by respected American correspondents suffices to refute these responses, as does much other evidence.

For example, the Review cites the Israeli Government statement that prison authorities had not violated the UN Standard Minimum Rules for the Treatment of Prisoners. I admit that I have not read these Rules. But I wonder whether they are consistent with the following eyewitness description by H.D.S. Greenway in the Washington Post (March 20, 1977):

"(The prisoners) live cramped together, 10, 20, 30 to a cell, so closely packed that there is little room to step between them when they are sleeping. There are no chairs, tables, not even beds. They sleep on rubber mats less than a third of an inch thick...The prisoners are brought buckets of food, which they eat on the floor of their cells."

Greenway reports that the prisoners spend 20 or 22 hours a day in these cells, under these conditions! Hundreds have been sentenced to long, even life terms. Greenway is reporting from Ashkelon, where a hunger strike against such atrocious conditions continued for two months, despite forced feeding, scattering of prisoners among jails in an attempt to break the protest, rejection of pleas by families and Arab elected officials. There was only limited reporting in the United States, but enough to alert a human rights organization. We have much more evidence about the barbarous conditions in Israeli prisons than we do, say, about anything comparable in Vietnam. But note the difference in the way these facts are treated in the Annual Review. All that it has to say is that Mr. Shestack found "a high degree of compliance with international standards" in Israel in 1972, a finding that one must treat with a certain skepticism, given the fact that the Review ignores direct eyewitness reports of 1977, and given further facts about Israeli prisons, to which I return directly.

In reference to Israel, all abuses are "alleged" or "reported." In the case of Vietnam, they are fact. Of course, in all cases the violations are "alleged" or "reported." The question is, to put it bluntly, whether we consider Arabs to be members of the human race, whose testimony and suffering are to be treated seriously, or whether only the reports of Russian Jews and Vietnamese refugees are to be granted such consideration. Assuming that Arabs are regarded as human beings, then there is an enormous amount of evidence of abuses far more serious than those so gently discussed in the Review in its section on Israel. These are furthermore systematic, and persistent over many years.

Consider the matter of torture of prisoners. The London Sunday Times, June 19, 1977, presented a report by the Insight team on torture of Arab prisoners so "systematic and widespread" that "it appears to be sanctioned at some level as deliberate policy." They suggest several reasons: to obtain information; to reduce Arabs in occupied territories to passivity; or to secure confessions, so that it is possible to pretend that the prisoners are criminals, not political prisoners, and thus to still protest from human rights organizations. It has long been noted by people concerned with civil and human rights that the number of "confessions" in Israeli trials of Arabs is extraordinarily high, a fact that should have alerted the International League.

The Insight team report of torture does not make pleasant reading. They present an extremely careful analysis, knowing the double standard that prevails in the West concerning Israel. If you study this extensive report you will agree, I think, that they have presented information of a considerably higher quality than is available with regard to torture in many other cases that you, and I, have protested with outrage and persistence. Surely this record far exceeds in brutality anything that we know of from Vietnam. But compare again the difference in treatment in the Annual Review. There is nothing mentioned in the League report about the systematic Israeli torture of Arab prisoners. Rather, the report discusses such topics as "alleged Government interference" with the curriculum at Bir Zeit. In my opinion, this is outrageous.

I note in the press (NY Times, June 24, 1977) that the International League has protested torture in Iran, quite properly. Given the concern for the techniques of SAVAK, it might have been appropriate, in the Annual Review, to refer to the report from Iran by Richard Sale (Washington Post, May 9, 1977)

that "innumerable Iranians, many in a position to know, told me that the Israelis oversee SAVAK's techniques." In this case too it might be reasonable to call for an on-the-spot investigation.

In defense of the League's special treatment of Israel, one might respond that the London Sunday Times report appeared too late for inclusion. There are three problems with such a response:

1. There was ample evidence available before the appearance of this detailed study that torture takes place in Israeli interrogation centers. There is virtually no civil libertarian tradition in the Israeli legal profession. Consequently, almost all serious cases are taken either by Arab lawyers, or by two Jewish lawyers: Felicia Langer (Communist) and Leah Tsemel (Trotskyite). Langer and Tsemel have shown great courage and commitment in defending the rights of Arabs, suffering much abuse for taking their profession seriously. Both have presented very extensive evidence of torture, among other atrocities. Langer has a book that appeared both in Hebrew and in English, With My Own Eyes; it is virtually unattainable in the United States and has never been reviewed, another indication of the prevailing double standard. This book contains evidence that I find hard to dismiss. Tsemel also has provided extensive evidence, reported by her clients and supplemented by her own observations, in court and outside. This is almost never mentioned in the United States. I did transmit some evidence that she had provided in a letter that appeared in the NY Review of Books (March 16, 1977), including a report of torture. There is a story of 5 months of torture and abuse followed by expulsion in the Christian Science Monitor (March 1, 1977); one of the rare examples in the American press, which has behaved in a scandalous manner in the case of human rights violations in Israel -- it is typical that the London Sunday Times should be the first newspaper to present a detailed report, a front page story covering four pages, while the NY Times accords it a few lines on an inside page (June 20, 1977). Southerland's report in the Monitor was followed a few days later (March 11) by a letter from an Israeli soldier describing beatings and wanton murder of an old man by a military commander, which he had witnessed in the occupied territories. Nouvel Observateur, very sympathetic to Israel, carried a report by the Israeli journalist Victor Cygielman. Or, see the gruesome tale of Muhammad Akel, London Times, April 25, 1977. These are a few recent examples, surely enough to have alerted a human rights organization committed to the principles it proclaims.

2. If the information presented in the Times Insight team report was indeed unknown to the League, rather than simply disregarded, then the reason is that the League has been very careful to insulate itself from this information. This is a serious charge, and I do not make it lightly. It is, however, quite true. On August 2, 1973 and September 18, 1973 I sent letters of protest to Mrs. Greenfield and Mr. Shestack concerning actions that the League had taken that I regarded then, and still regard, as utterly scandalous, bearing on this matter. Since the details are contained in these letters, which I presume are available, I will not repeat here (I will be glad to send copies if they are not available to you). Briefly, the League suspended its Israeli affiliate after the Government had made an effort to destroy this affiliate by flooding it with fake members whose dues would be paid by the governing Labor Party. This farce was thrown out by the Israeli Courts, though the wording of the decision, as I noted, should have sufficed to arouse international protest. After this scandalous attempt by the government to destroy the Israeli League for Human and Civil Rights, and after the Courts had rebuffed it, the International League suspended its Israeli affiliate on the grounds that there was a controversy "no meaningful human rights activities were going forward" (in fact, during that period the Israeli League was producing masses of information of the sort now presented by the Insight team). By similar standards, the International League might well suspend the Moscow Human Rights Commission when it comes under government attack. Having disaffiliated the Israeli League, the International League was, I assume, no longer receiving its extensive and detailed reports of abuse of Arabs, including torture and much else; prior to this, it was simply disregarding these reports. Thus it was left to the London Sunday Times to do the work that is properly the responsibility of the International League. In fact, what the Insight team reported was not unknown, at least to those who choose to know.

3. The record would lead a rational person to predict that information of the sort presented by the Insight inquiry will not appear in the 1977-8 Annual Review. Similarly, I do not expect to see this information conveyed in

the journal of your American affiliate, the American Jewish Committee, though this journal is heavily devoted to affairs in Israel and is quite free with condemnation of Arabs. Perhaps some remark will appear in the 1977-8 Report. In that case, the record suggests, it will refer to "alleged torture" and will be accompanied by denials from government officials, which will not be rejected as "unfounded in fact." I hope that this prediction is incorrect. If it proves to be correct, then the only reasonable conclusion will be that the International League has abandoned any pretense of a commitment to principle.

Torture of prisoners is not the only reported abuse. In fact, a brief study of the Israeli press would reveal many others that are certainly on a level with what you report from Russia and Vietnam, the two prime enemies of the American government. Consider the forcible expulsion of thousands of Arab farmers from their homes south of Gaza, to clear the area for all-Jewish settlements where the expelled Arabs are now permitted to work as hired laborers. When has the Russian government last done this to a community of Jews? Or consider the fact that thousands of Arab workers from the occupied territories are locked into factories at night because they are not permitted on the streets, a fact that became public knowledge when three were found burned to death after a factory fire -- a practice, incidentally, that continues since. Cf. Yediot Ahronot, March 16, 1976; Ha'aretz, March 19, 1976; London Economist, March 20, 1976; NY Review, March 16, 1977; Al-Ittihad, April 22, 1977. When have the Vietnamese last reported to have practiced similar atrocities? Or consider the fact that two West German citizens suspected of terrorism have been held in prison since January, 1976 (secretly for over a year), with no trial scheduled. Trials, if ever held, will be before a closed military tribunal. They have been denied counsel of their **choice and must select** from a list submitted by the security services. Washington Post, March 31, 1977; NY Times, June 16, 1977; Maariv, April 13, 1977. A similar act by the Russian government would hardly have gone unnoticed. I note in this connection that in rejecting the report of the Insight team the government of Israel claims that "All defendants in courts, including military courts, are represented by lawyers of their own choice" -- a statement that is contradicted directly by reports in the Israeli press, such as the one just cited, as well as by the fact that Attorney Langer has been denied the right to defend Israeli soldiers in military proceedings.

Or consider a report in Ha'aretz, May 12, 1977, describing how hundreds of Arabs in a Jerusalem suburb were forced from their homes by the army at midnight (including an old man who was ill), and "concentrated" in an area a kilometer away to sit on the ground for two hours for a lecture warning them against "rioting" (demonstrations are illegal; even mild passive resistance, such as closing shops in protest, has evoked military force in response). Consider the outcry here when Russian dissidents are subjected to similar abuse. Or consider the 10-day jail sentence given to an Arab student in Haifa for possessing leaflets calling for demonstrations against "the conquest and the expropriation of lands" and calling for "the freeing of imprisoned Palestinian students" (Maariv, March 25, 1976): what does this tell us about the state of civil rights for Arab citizens? Mr. Shestack, according to the Review, protested to the Soviet government over the campaign of vilification directed against Dr. Sakharov. Quite appropriate. The head of the Israeli League for Human and Civil Rights has been subjected to a press and radio campaign no less intense. Where is the protest from the League?

The Review states that "Eight Arab scholars and writers from the Israeli-occupied West Bank territory are alleged to be held without charges since early 1975." It would not have required great enterprise for the League to determine whether such "allegations" are correct. Daniel Amit, a physicist at the Hebrew University, has attempted to arouse international protest over the fact that Taysir Aruri, professor of mathematics at Bir-Zeit University (whose president, physicist Hanna Nasser was summarily expelled from the country with no credible charge; Nasser was a well-known Arab moderate, and it is suspected that this was the reason for his expulsion) has spent 39 months in jail without any charge or accusation, and that even appeals that he be brought to trial have met with no response from the authorities. Professor Aruri was one of hundreds of people arrested in an Israeli crackdown in the Spring of 1974. The fate of most of the people arrested is unknown. Apparently many remained in jail for long periods and were then released, never having been charged, while a few others were put on trial (it would be a useful exercise for the League to investigate some of these trials), and others remain in prison. This, incidentally, is presumably quite proper behavior for the Israeli government, according to Harvard Law Professor Alan Dershowitz, who is an active member of

one of your American affiliates, the ACLU, and who has defended preventive detention in Commentary, the journal of another American affiliate, the American Jewish Committee. I fail to see why the International League has not investigated these allegations, or even called for a neutral on-the-spot investigation, but rather contents itself, in this case, with a request to the government for information. Note that the Arab scholar just mentioned has been under preventive detention not since early 1975, but since early 1974.

There are only a few scattered examples. The record shows a consistent disregard for the brutal treatment of Arabs under Israeli military occupation, and the many abuses within Israel itself. The London Sunday Times observes in an editorial accompanying the report on torture that Arabs in the occupied territories can rely only on the international community for protection. The International League has miserably failed in its responsibility to accord them this protection.

I noted above that one of your American affiliates is the American Jewish Committee. This surprised me, frankly, when I saw it in the Annual Review. I have been involved in civil rights issues in the United States for quite a few years, and I do not recall any major contribution of the American Jewish Committee. But perhaps I am wrong about this. I do know, however, that the Committee is deeply concerned with Israel, and quick to deny any reference to abuses of civil and human rights in Israel. Its journal, Commentary, has published nothing on these abuses, to the best of my knowledge, apart from articles supporting preventive detention and other intolerable practices by people who claim to be civil libertarians. Choice of this group as an American affiliate seems odd. I would be interested in knowing the principle under which the American Jewish Committee is an acceptable affiliate, but not, say the American Communist Party. The latter has been quite active, far more so than the American Jewish Committee, in protest against civil and human rights abuses in the United States, and its apologetics for the Soviet Union seem to me in no way different from the behavior of the American Jewish Committee, with regard to Israel. I think it is very striking that the American Jewish Committee, but not the American Communist Party or the Israeli League for Human and Civil Rights, is regarded as an appropriate affiliate for the International League.

I have briefly discussed four crucial cases: the United States and Israel (the major aid recipient, by a substantial margin); Russia and Vietnam, the two main enemies of the US government. I think it is evident, even from this brief review, that the League employs entirely different standards for enemies of the US government, on the one hand, and this government and its dependencies on the other (the term "dependency" is accurate; US aid to Israel amounts to some 25% of its GNP). This is precisely the fault for which we condemn the World Peace Council.

You can be certain that criticisms of this nature will not be made public in the United States, or at least will never reach more than a tiny audience. The reason is that the press, by and large, is committed to the very same dual standard that appears to animate the League. Needless to say, the journal of your American affiliate, the American Jewish Committee, is unlikely to offer space to these views, but the same is true much more generally. Therefore, public protest cannot impel a change in the systematic policy of the League that I have reviewed. If this policy is to change, it will have to be on the basis of a serious internal evaluation. I would strongly urge that you initiate such an evaluation. I think that if it is undertaken seriously, it will lead to the conclusion that the International League for Human Rights must significantly change its current course if it is to be true to the principles that it proclaims.

Sincerely yours,

Noam Chomsky

This Palestine Human Rights Bulletin is issued by the Palestine Human Rights Campaign (P.H.R.C.). Since Israel's continued violations against Palestinian human rights receive little or no attention in the United States, the P.H.R.C. was formed in May of 1977 to:

- 1. Promote the investigation, publication and understanding of these incidents of human rights violations,*
- 2. Lend support to the victims and their attorneys,*
- 3. Secure the enforcement of existing internationally recognized norms of human rights and fundamental freedoms for the Palestinian people.*

For information or to make a contribution write to:

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