

Address by Bertie Ahern, T.D., at the Lunch to mark the honouring of Dr. Anwar al-Bunni winner of the 2008 Front Line Award. Friday, 13th June 2008

Brian Jacobs, Chair of Friends of Front Line U.S.,
Mary Lawlor, Director, Front Line,

It is a great honour and pleasure for me to be with you today and to address this important gathering which marks a significant stage in the development of an organisation for which I have considerable personal admiration, namely Front Line. We meet at a significant point in the evolution of our understanding of the importance of a human rights dimension to international relations and the emergence of a more globalised society.

As a result of our historical experience in Ireland, where we have been subjected to both political oppression and generations of economic injustice, including a catastrophic Famine, I think Irish people have a very rounded sense of the full range of rights and how they reinforce one another. I think this explains why there is such strong public interest in Ireland in human rights and human development issues. We are proud to number among our people many human rights defenders. Down through the years, Irish missionaries, doctors, humanitarian aid workers and soldiers have given themselves to the service of other communities in their pursuit of peace and development.

Wherever the rights and freedoms of human beings are ignored, there are those who champion the cause of what is just. These are the people that Front Line works to support and protect. The men and women who stand bravely apart from the crowd in individual acts of courage. Many have spoken out at great personal expense. Sacrifices have been made beyond what anyone would expect. And lone voices echo those of the many who are forced into the silence of repression.

Through their work, Front Line helps human rights defenders make their voices heard. We are all here today because we offer our support to courageous human rights defenders all over the world. To listen to their stories is to be humbled by the extraordinary bravery of ordinary people. These men and women have taken on great individual responsibility to work for the common good.

Recalling the compelling personal stories of individual human rights defenders reminds us of the basic freedoms that we so often take for granted. Each journey has started differently. Some struggles are born of personal hardship and experience. Others challenge cruelty and oppression on behalf of their communities. All represent more than their own private interests.

So many human rights defenders have to show enormous strength of character in the face of danger and opposition. They are representative of hundreds, if not thousands, of others who carry out this valuable work. Human rights can seem abstract to us in the hustle and bustle of our everyday lives, but this is because we can take so much for granted. Those of us who have the privilege to live in

peaceful and prosperous democracies can find it hard to imagine the daily difficulties faced by others. While our systems may not be perfect, they are underscored by systems of checks and balances which are designed to protect and vindicate the rights of individuals.

Front Line provides solidarity and practical assistance to human rights defenders in all regions of the world. Both these forms of support are vital to those that Front Line represents. This relatively young organisation has developed considerable expertise in the years since it was first formed. Through its many activities it provides tangible assistance to so many people on a daily basis, offering a helping hand to those reaching out for support. The workshops, the training, the advice – all become valuable tools to aid human rights defenders in carrying out their important work.

This practical assistance is underscored by what is at the core of Front Line's activities – an unwavering solidarity with the individual human rights defender. To stand up for what is right in the face of resistance and opposition can be a lonely and difficult task. Seeking to change established norms can take years of commitment, perseverance and courage. Front Line shows these men and women that they are not alone, and that there is recognition and support available to them.

The Irish Government is committed to supporting those who defend human rights in all parts of the world. We recognise that the international community has a responsibility towards those that are most vulnerable. I am proud that Ireland has championed in an active and vigorous way the positions of those who defend the human rights of others. Ireland takes a leading role in promoting the rights of human rights defenders who, by the very nature of their non-violent work, promote respect for human rights and are often the subject of unjustified attacks.

The Irish Government is also proud to support Front Line in their work and a strong working relationship has grown over the years, both on individual cases and on broader human rights policy. We recognise the important role played by human rights defenders and our human rights work reflects this.

The adoption of the EU Guidelines on Human Rights Defenders in 2004 was one of the key priorities of the then Irish Presidency of the EU in the field of human rights. We continue to work to ensure that these Guidelines are fully implemented in the work of the EU.

At the United Nations, and in other multilateral fora, Ireland actively promotes the rights of human rights defenders and opposes attempts to undermine their work. The special role of human rights defenders was acknowledged by the international community with the adoption of a United Nations Declaration on human rights defenders in 1998. This strong, useful and pragmatic text emphasises that there is a global human rights movement that involves all of us - States and ordinary people alike.

Most recently, Ireland worked as the lead negotiator for the European Union in

support of the successful renewal of the mandate of the UN Special Representative on Human Rights Defenders at the March session of the Human Rights Council. The Special Representative has been a tireless advocate for the men and women who work for human rights and Ireland is proud to have played a strong leadership role in reaffirming the commitment of the international community to our shared support for human rights defenders.

In that context, I am honoured to be participating in the honouring of Dr. Anwar al-Bunni, head of the Free Political Prisoners Committee and one of the leading human rights lawyers in Syria. His record of activity, his consistent and faithful engagement with those acting in support of basic freedoms and human rights, his integrity, independence and record of achievement, his willingness to risk and ultimately incur penalties for his work and commitment, and his continuing struggle and witness are truly worthy of recognition and admiration. In his life and work he reflects the heroism and idealism of that band of men and women who risk so much on behalf of their people in support of the rights and opportunities which so many of us can take for granted. In acknowledging his work we are inspired to reconsider our own potential to do more and to achieve more in this vital cause.

This year sees the 60th anniversary of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights. The anniversary is a significant milestone for the international community. It offers us the opportunity to reaffirm our commitment to the Universal Declaration. It challenges us to look at what has been achieved in the past 60 years, and to address the areas where we can do more.

Eleanor Roosevelt, who played a pivotal role in crafting the Universal Declaration, said that: 'The destiny of human rights is in the hands of all our citizens in all our communities'. It is up to each and every one of us to respond to this challenge. There is still much work to be done, but Front Line continues to remind us that some exceptional citizens carry this responsibility in exceptional and capable hands.

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