

IN THE TRAGEDY OF THE KURDS

DON'T FORGET TIBET

MEDIA RELEASE

MONDAY 13 MAY 1991

CANBERRA

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EMBARGO MONDAY 13 MAY 1991: 7.30 PM

In the Tragedy of the Kurds, don't Forget Tibet, Says Kirby

Canberra Monday

The demands of the people of Tibet to exercise self-determination were "irresistible" and should be supported by the people of Australia. This was the message given tonight by Justice Michael Kirby to a large meeting of Parliamentary and other supporters of Tibet held in the Committee Room at Parliament House, Canberra. Justice Kirby is a Member of the Executive of the Geneva-based International Commission of Jurists and is President of the Australian Section of that body. He was joined by Dr Michael van Walt, the Dalai Lama's representative who is in Australia at present. The meeting at Parliament House brought to a close a day-long conference at the Australian National University in Canberrā on issues raised by the demand for Tibetan self-determination and independence.

"Like the Kurds"

Justice Kirby said that the demand of the Tibetan people for self-determination had to be seen in the context of the "proliferating demands for the rights of peoples":

"Everywhere today we can see the assertion of the rights of peoples. It can be seen along the whole gigantic borderland of the Soviet Union:

from Armenia and Georgia to Lithuania and Estonia. It can be seen in the unrest in Yugoslavia. It is evidenced in the tensions between the Zulus and other races in South Africa. In a sense, it can be even seen in our own country with the revival of confidence and assertion amongst the Aboriginal people. It is an irresistible force of history at this time.

The notion that China will be immune from this powerful international force is absurd. Where people have been mixed and absorbed by another culture it may be impossible to provide them with the exercise of the right to self-determination. But where they have a long history of separate identity and territory, separate language, religion, culture and a will to be separate, international law guarantees them the right to self-determination. This is the basic foundation principle of the real New World Order established by the United Nations Charter. That Charter is founded on the rights of peoples - not of States. It promises people the right to self-determination. That is the promise which the world gives to the people of Tibet. If they choose association with China, well and good. If they choose to be independent, the world should uphold that choice. At the moment they are denied a free choice.

In a sense, the tragedy of the Kurds amounts to a melancholy re-enactment of the earlier rejection of self-determination of the Tibetans. The world, distracted by Korea, stood idly by forty years ago when the Chinese Peoples' Liberation Army absorbed Tibet. Now, it seems, we will be equally idle as the people of Hong Kong are absorbed into China without the slightest consultation with them as to whether that is their choice. These are the ways of the 19th century: trading peoples as if pawns on a map. The way of the twentieth century is the way of political self-determination of peoples. Ultimately this force is irresistible. It may be postponed in China for a year or two. But it will come. And its coming will be Tibet's opportunity to choose. Thousands of years of identity cannot be stamped out by forty years of control" Justice Kirby said.

Australia should speak bluntly about human rights

Justice Kirby said that the lesson of the "liberation" of Eastern Europe in 1989-90 was that Western apologists for the previous autocracies, however well intentioned, were

shown to have done the cause of freedom a disservice:

"There is an almost ineradicable colonial cringe in the Australian makeup. Doubtless it derives from the relationship of dependence upon Britain when our country was established. Then we substituted the United States. Now we seek to win friends in North Asia by 'going along with' abuses to human rights and departures from the rule of law. There are no second class human beings. Human rights mean what they say: they belong to individuals because they are human. Peoples' rights belong to identifiable groups and races of people. These are guaranteed by international law. We do not win the respect of such a great country as China by biting our tongue when China departs from international law. Why was it relevant to say 'China won't like this' when the Dalai Lama's trip to Australia was announced? Australia should grow up and speak honestly for truth and human rights. That is what its people want. It is what the US Congress is doing in its current resolution on Tibetan independence and what President Bush did by pointedly greeting the Dalai Lama last month. What other topic - but Tibet - could bring together in the US Congress two such diverse characters as Senators Jesse H Elms and Edward Kennedy? It is a tribute to Federal Parliament that it unanimously passed the recent resolution on Tibet. Let the officials representing the autocratic regime in Beijing jump up and down. Australia is a democracy. The time of doublespeak has finished. The time of plain talking for human rights has arrived. And especially in the House of the People, Parliament, our representatives can say what they believe. For once, they well and truly reflected the concerns of the Australian people about human rights abuses and departures from the rule of law in China. It is we who should be jumping up and down: in solidarity with fighters for freedom and to assert the rights of the peoples of Tibet - and of other peoples who are denied the precious right of political self-determination" Justice Kirby concluded.

For further information on the Parliamentary Meeting and Dinner (which will be addressed by Dr van Walt) telephone Lynn Russell at the Australia Tibet Council (06)2811 493. For contact with Justice Kirby's office telephone (02) 230 8203.